

On the library and information literacy education of vulnerable groups

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Abstract: This paper defines and classifies vulnerable groups, elaborates the necessity of information literacy education of vulnerable groups, analyzes the feasibility for the library to carry out the education, and then discusses specific measures taken by the library to fulfill it.

Key words: library; vulnerable groups; information literacy education

Since the 1990s, with the rapid economic transition and social transformation, the issue of vulnerable groups in China has gradually been highlighted and become the focus widely concerned by the government and society. In the new information environment, it is an undoubtedly important issue in the process of developing economy and building a harmonious society to show concern for vulnerable groups and help them improve their information literacy and enhance their competitiveness.

1. Definition and classification of vulnerable groups

Vulnerable groups, also known as social vulnerable groups or vulnerable groups in society, is a concept used to analyze the unfair distribution of economic interests and social power, and the incongruity and irrationality of the social structure in modern society. Internationally, scholars in the field of socialism have reached a basic consensus that vulnerable groups refer to those socially disadvantaged people resulting from certain barriers or the lack of economic, political and social opportunities (WANG Zi-zhou & XIAO Xue, 2005).

Generally, vulnerable groups are put into two categories: physiologically vulnerable groups and socially vulnerable groups. The former is made disadvantaged for some apparent physiological reasons, such as age, illness, etc., and it includes children, the elderly, the disabled and the mentally ill. The latter becomes vulnerable basically for some social reasons, such as unemployment, exclusion, etc., and it covers the unemployed, the poor, laid-off workers, disaster victims, migrant workers, informal employees and those in a weak position in the labor relations. When it comes to China's context, the socially vulnerable groups constitute the majority.

On the basis of clearly defining vulnerable groups, we should also recognize that it is a relative concept. In the information society where computers and network technology are widely applied, the crowd (even those wealthy people) who cannot get full access to the information might be reduced to vulnerable groups in a relative sense. So it is said that "technological progress intensifies the vulnerability of vulnerable groups and thus help form a new vulnerable group".

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2. Necessity of information literacy education of vulnerable groups

In 1974, information literacy was first put forward by Mr. Paul Zurkowski, president of Information Industry Association of the United States. He described information literacy as “the competence to use information, study information technology, and mold information solutions to problems” (Davied V. Loertsue, 1999). Since the 1980s, with the wide and rapid application of the computer-centered information technology, the importance of information literacy has received a broader recognition.

In the era of knowledge-based economy, information plays an increasingly important role. Despite the disadvantages of vulnerable groups for various reasons, they have stronger demands for information with regard to employment, education and training, health, social welfare, entertainment and so forth. However, the information media of the current mainstream society are not appropriate for or relevant to them at all. As analyzed, vulnerable groups are confronted with barriers to information access out of both the individual and social reasons, in which individual factors primarily refer to the person’s physiology, psychology, values, social interactions, etc., while social factors refer to the lack of information resources and the deficiency and imperfection of social infrastructure. At the present stage in China, education and training institutions are still lacking in number but expensive in cost, which makes them out of reach of vulnerable groups whose income is scarcely enough for sustenance.

Vulnerable groups cannot have the equal involvement in information activities due to their relatively low-level use of information and network technology. It results in the “digital divide”, followed by a series of social problems, such as “information gap”, “split knowledge”, “polarization” and so on, which will inevitably affect the social equity and in turn affect the social stability. Therefore, it is of great significance to introduce information technology and network knowledge to vulnerable groups, impart ways and means of obtaining information, and guide and help them to have better access to information, for the purpose of leveling up the “digital divide” which badly affects the normal development of vulnerable groups.

3. Feasibility for the library to conduct information literacy education of vulnerable groups

Library is an important place where people’s information literacy is cultivated and ability to study is developed. To foster the reader’s information awareness and information capacity is essentially one of the important aspects of library’s educational function. Nowadays, modern libraries can be found all over China intended for social communities, serving public members of all ages, from all walks of life, and of all types, so they hold an incomparably wide range of education receivers. The spirit of public libraries is ensuring social members’ equal access to information and safeguarding social justice in terms of information knowledge (FAN Bing-si, 2004). With the idea of teaching and serving all without discrimination, the libraries provide a possibility of reflecting vulnerable groups’ political will of social equality and protecting their fundamental right of education, though they may still be deficient in economic resources. Therefore, public libraries, as an important component of the social educational system which are called “shelters for the poor short of information”, should definitely take up responsibility to cultivate the information literacy of vulnerable groups. In conformity with the tendency, IFLA set up the Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons Section (LSDP), suggesting that libraries should supply information and service for those in an area who are excluded from the normal services for various reasons

(<http://www.ifla.org.sg/VII/s9/index.htm>).

4. Strategies for library to conduct information literacy education of vulnerable groups

In the information age, it is the essence of information literacy education to enhance vulnerable groups' information awareness and information capacity, so as to enable them to form a daily habit of obtaining information. In view of the current information literacy education of vulnerable groups, the libraries must strive to get multi-supports, strengthen self-construction, and carry out educational activities of various forms and with different contents to improve their information literacy.

4.1 To get supports from the government and social community

In an age of the rapid development of industrialization and knowledgization where vulnerable groups are in urgent need of cultural and knowledge resources, the information literacy education of them relies to a larger extent on social concerns and supports than that of other ordinary citizens. Therefore, mutual efforts should be made by the government and society to deal with the issue of the information literacy education of vulnerable groups, by means of formulating policies and regulations conducive to the development of vulnerable groups, increasing funding for libraries and educational institutions, and mobilizing social forces so as to effectively ensure vulnerable groups equal access to education and the utilization of public cultural resources.

4.2 To strengthen self-construction of the library

Firstly, the libraries should be designed and constructed on the principle of minimizing various barriers of facilities to obtaining information. All means of science and technology should be used in the construction of barrier-free access and facilities for the disabled to create a good environment for free exchanges, equal participation and free access to information.

Secondly, for the educational functions of the library, the quality of librarians is directly proportional to the effectiveness of education. So the librarians must establish the concept of lifelong learning and continuously improve their professional qualities. At the same time, they should also build up and then implement the idea of "teaching and serving all without discrimination", and truly manifest the impartiality of the literacy education of vulnerable groups.

Thirdly, it is necessary for the library to take into account the needs of all while the literature collection system is set up. A certain proportion of literature should be included to meet the needs of vulnerable groups, such as those documents and rules relating to poverty alleviation, solutions to difficulty, employment, education, social security, and the Braille edition of relevant literature, the instructional literature on rehabilitation of the disabled and so on. All of these constitute an indispensable portion of their spiritual food.

4.3 To carry out content-rich user training and education services in various forms

To begin with, the library should gratify the information needs of vulnerable groups to the largest extent by way of providing them with mobile libraries, books bespeaking services, literature searching services and telephone consulting services, and develop their information awareness and information capacity with the aid of tours, seminars, lectures, classes, training courses and other forms of user training. In the meantime, the libraries can make use of modern information technologies for online learning and distance education, as well as for education services.

Next, the library user education should cover aiding reading, understanding and using libraries, improving information technology and literacy and so on, and gradually lay emphasis upon cultivating users' ability to solve

information problems. To fulfill this, the libraries must get actively involved into the anti-illiteracy work, introduce their building and services, instruct how to use the book catalogues and reference books, and especially launch the education and training of computer and network technologies, thereby assisting vulnerable groups to learn how to use these technologies in order that the “information divide” should be narrowed down.

Then, united with other sectors such as the trade union, and the labor, legal, industrial and commercial, and medical departments, the libraries can give technical guidance to vulnerable groups, impart professional knowledge, explain the employment policies, forecast the industry prospects, and answer their questions concerning policies, employment, laws, medical treatment, entertainment, etc. Besides, it is necessary to invite some enterprise executives and successful re-employees to exchange experience, helping vulnerable groups build up confidence of getting out of trouble.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is an obligatory responsibility conferred on society by history to concern about vulnerable groups, give them special support and assistance, help them upgrade their information quality, and enhance their capacity of self-development and self-improvement. Meanwhile, expressing humanistic emotions and helping vulnerable users accords with the library’s historical and humanistic tradition and responds to the call of the responsibility of society and the times.

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(Edited by Max and Jean)